

Trinity Church
June 15, 2008

Fifth Pentecost
RCL, Year A, Proper 6

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

Lord, you have inspired us to proclaim the good news, and sent us out to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. Make us instruments of your compassion.

As modern believers, we are not attracted to the unlikely. We are skeptical and suspicious of the unusual. This means, I think, that what God has to say to us today will be a difficult pill to swallow. The Scripture says that God's promise is so intense, the reality of God's compassion is so penetrating, that it cannot and will not be rebuffed. God's promise will be fulfilled. God's compassion will overcome any obstacle, whether it's understood by us or not.

That is the gist of the appearance of the three strangers to Abraham and Sarah at the oak of Mamre. The Epistle to the Hebrews says that these strangers were angels, and so they must have been, for what human of sound mind would say to an aged couple, decades past childbearing, that they would have a son? But angels see things differently. They are fully aware that the promise of God is far more powerful and compelling than any mere human circumstance. We know why Sarah laughed at this ridiculous talk. But the angels, if that is what they were, were incredulous. "Why did Sarah laugh?" they ask. "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" If God has promised, it will happen. And right on schedule, what God promised was delivered. Isaac – the child of the promise - was born.

How we want to respond to Abraham and Sarah is how we also respond when we hear Jesus say, "Proclaim the good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." We might warm up to cheerfully proclaiming the good news, but don't tell me to cast out demons. That's just not a part of my world.

When I worked with the Bishop some years ago, I helped him vet clergy from other dioceses and parts of the Anglican Communion who wanted to come to Maryland to do ministry. A priest sent a résumé that stated quite matter-of-factly that what he was particularly good at was casting out demons, and that he had been asked on several occasions to help others in this work. When he came for an interview, I was skeptical. At worst this priest was crazy. At best it would be hard to see how he could use this gift in a typical parish. Fortunately, he had been among us long enough to know that it was impossible to cast out demons among those who had no belief in demons. But among those who do believe that demons cause all manner of disease and misfortune, he was able to do just as Jesus did – cast them out. He passed our muster and spent several years among us in creative ministry.

The way we see things is not the way others see, and none of us understands the intensity of God's promise and compassion.

Bernard Mizeki was a tribesman from what is now called Zimbabwe. He went to South Africa to work in the mines there and was baptized a Christian by missionaries. He longed to go back to his people to proclaim the good news that God's kingdom was near. The opportunity came, and he returned to this tribe in the place where he grew up, a place he knew well. The tribespeople were animists: they were able to see the spiritual aspects of animals and trees – a gift we lost a long time ago. This tribe had a particular attachment to a grove of sacred trees. Among the trees people found peace, healing, and insight.

Bernard preached and talked, talked and preached just like the missionaries, but to no avail. One day, a member of the tribe came to him to say that many people were intrigued by what he had to say, but that they were afraid of the trees. Would he please go and preach to the trees, and if they believed him, it would be good enough for them.

So, Bernard prayed, and then said to the people that he would preach to the trees and see what happened. And so he went very respectfully into the grove and talked with each of the trees. He proclaimed the good news. He told them that the kingdom had arrived and was very near them. For many hours over several days, he did this, and then he lay down among the beautiful trees and fell asleep. He dreamed that the trees bowed down to him and told him that they joyfully heard the good news of God's salvation. That they had been growing for years waiting for this good news, and that they wished to be baptized. Bernard awoke, and immediately went to each tree, baptized it, and marked it as Christ's own forever. He carved a cross on each tree.

When morning came and the tribe awoke, they saw the crosses in the trees, and Bernard explained what had happened, and how happy the trees were to be baptized in the Lord Jesus. If it was good enough for the wise and noble trees, it was good enough for them, and they were baptized, and their children after them. Today the whole of Zimbabwe is Christian, and despite their desperate difficulties as a country now, tens of thousands gather each year at the grove of trees to see the crosses, and to renew their baptismal vows, and to thank the trees for leading them to Christ, and for sending St. Bernard Mizeki to them! He is buried in the grove among his first converts. With God, the promise is so great, the compassion so powerful, it can speak even through the trees.

Today we are challenged to think outside the box again as we bring Marion Liles to baptism. Can we dare to think that an infant is able to die with Christ in baptism in a death like his and to be raised up out of the water in a resurrection like his? Can we believe that the Holy Spirit can anoint the body and soul of one so young? Many would say it is a sentimental symbol at best. But like Sarah and Abraham, like Bernard and his trees, God's promise is so great, God's compassion so real, that even in Marion the kingdom of God is able to be born in her wholecloth. The promise will be realized. God's love will not be mocked. And Marion will become one with us in Christ Jesus, and the world will be made new.

Dare we see as others see? Dare we experience what others do? To dare is to realize that how we see is not the only way of seeing, a gift in itself. But to dare is also to embrace the promise, to succumb to the irresistible compassion of God.